

YouthConnect!

A Youth-Led Community Service Initiative

Arts & Media- Based Service

As a supplemental resource to PASE's YouthConnect! Manual for Youth-Led Community Service, we offer a series of Profiles on Youth-Led Community Service Projects. The local projects profiled were planned, executed and documented by the staff and young people involved with the YouthConnect! Initiative in 2003-2004. The MONY Foundation and the AOL-Time Warner Foundation supported this collaborative initiative.

The PASE Profiles of Youth-Led Community Service Series provides concrete examples of youth-led projects in seven different categories: Intergenerational Service, Youth Councils, Environmental Stewardship, Peer Education, Arts- and Media-Based Service, Advocacy, and Service Learning. Of course, there are other categories of community service but these have been selected to illustrate to the reader the breadth and scope of this youth development modality.

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“Media/Arts provide an incredible opportunity to help the young people channel their creativity and reach a broad audience with their message of social change.”

*--Janis Astor del Valle, Program Director
The Point Community Development Corporation*

WHAT IS ARTS- AND MEDIA-BASED COMMUNITY SERVICE?

An Art- or Media-based Service project uses communicative mediums—ranging from fine arts to poetry to web design—to create a product aimed at concrete problems or issues. For example, some poetry may be the product of important self-exploration and qualify as art, but poetry that is intended to inspire and educate and is widely disseminated constitutes a form of service. Since the arts and other media are often controlled by institutions and forces outside of our communities, youth-made art and media can be transformative both for the young people producing it and for the communities that “consume” it.

WHY CHOOSE MEDIA/ARTS AS A COMMUNITY SERVICE MODALITY?

Youth development specialists engaged in media-based projects agree that their role is to provide structure and encouragement for youth to take ownership of their own creative process and product. For example, DreamYard, an arts-based youth agency that works with youth in upper Manhattan and the Bronx, provides their students with clear criteria for the highest standard of writing and performing a poem. Students then evaluate each other’s work based on these criteria. They then feel confident in sharing their poetry and teaching others.

Janis Astor del Valle, Program Director at The Point Community Development Corporation says that expressive, communication-based arts and media activities allow communities “to really listen to our youth, their problems, ask what’s on their mind, how they’re feeling, what they think.” She explains: “Kids have grown up in the MTV era, their world revolves around videos and computers...Learning becomes exciting and intriguing for them when they can use media to conduct research and produce results, such as on our website.”

THE FOLLOWING PROJECT PROFILES OFFER CONCRETE ILLUSTRATIONS FOR HOW ARTS- AND MEDIA-BASED COMMUNITY SERVICE CAN HELP DEVELOP THESE PARTICULAR DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS* AND SKILLS IN YOUTH:

Community Values Youth: Young people’s participation in various public events and their contributions to public media can elicit a positive community response.

Youth as Resources: Youth are responsible for researching and communicating information on a specific issue (e.g., teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), pollution/asthma) to the community via various mediums, such as a newspaper, website, or TV show.

Integrity: Youth learn to articulate, stand up for, and take action on their convictions.

Empowerment: Youth are given the role of artist and teacher. They speak for their communities and teach their peers to do the same.

PROJECT PROFILE DREAMYARD'S "YOUNG MEN'S POETRY COLLECTIVE"

DESCRIPTION:

Young men learned poetry writing on various themes related to participants' community, and then shared those exercises and their poetry with their peers.

GOALS:

1. To give young men the tools to express their concerns about their community, creatively and articulately
2. Teach them to empower their peers to do the same, thereby fostering dialogue, leadership, and community

ACTIVITIES:

The Young Men's Poetry Collective, composed of a group of ten middle school students, began by participating in a variety of exercises to get to know each other, tell their stories, and build trust. One exercise was called "To Tell The Truth" in which the students divided into groups of two, shared stories from their lives with each other, and then learned the other person's story and shared it with the larger group. The students began to understand the joy and power of storytelling.

"When members of the Young Men's Poetry Collective led workshops, their peers listened in a way that I, as an educator, rarely see...Each member of the Collective was introduced to the concept of creative expression as a tool for dialogue, community building, and change."

--Daniel Beaty, Teaching Artist, DreamYard

The group began an in-depth study of two published poets: Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Teaching Artist Daniel Beaty explains, "Both of these poets wrote passionately about their communities and the times in which they were living. They discussed the importance of the written word in documenting a time and expressing what many people may feel, but fail to express. The students had a strong response to the dream poems by Langston Hughes--his ability to 'hold fast to dreams' in the midst of a 'barren field of snow.'" Through the study of established poets the students also learned elements of style, including stanza, rhyme, repetition, and rate.

The students then identified themes they wished to discuss: violence, absent fathers, music, heritage, and freedom to be themselves. Each week they completed a writing exercise based on a theme. The meetings began with a discussion of the theme in which the students would identify their feelings about the topic. Beaty notes that one of their most intimate and honest discussions was about absent fathers. They then created poems using a specific poetic form. Beaty brought in a model poem and the young men discussed the form in detail (e.g., What is a sonnet? How many lines does it have? What elements of poetic style are being used?) The students experimented with the poetic form and shared their poems with the group.

Youth also studied public speaking techniques and coached themselves on both the writing and presentation of poetry. "Peer coaching within the safety of our collective was a crucial step in preparation for their community service of teaching poetry to their peers," explains Beaty. The group established clear rules for what a good poem and presentation of a poem included. Critique became a matter of evaluating the poetry in relationship to this rubric. When a student shared a piece of writing, the listening students learned to ask questions about the writing, such as What are you trying to say? and What did this phrase mean? and to not use judgment words such as "bad" or "good."

After youth gained confidence in their writing, performance, and mastery of the exercises, they developed a list of places in the community where they would like to perform. The students came from four different classes within two different schools and wanted to share their writing and knowledge with their classmates. The young men created a letter outlining their intentions and each student was given the task of contacting his teacher and setting up a date for the Young Men's Poetry Collective to perform and lead a workshop within the class.

The young men ended the year by leading workshops for two classes of approximately 30 students on the theme of "Freedom To Be Yourself." The workshops began with the young men sharing poems they had written on this theme. They then distributed a handout that outlined the poetry exercises the class would complete. After explaining the exercises to the larger class, the students worked individually with smaller groups. The workshops concluded with the participants sharing their poems with the larger group.

After each workshop the Young Men's Poetry Collective had a discussion about the process. The students acknowledged the difficulty of offering constructive criticism to their peers without being "mean" and the joy of "letting people know something about what you know about."

CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:

The primary challenge was the level of commitment. The Young Men's Poetry Collective was a voluntary afterschool activity. Furthermore, the program was literary and not athletic. Beaty notes, "After a day of classes, the students sometimes did not feel like reading and writing even if they enjoyed the community we created."

Another challenge was that the Collective began towards the end of the school year and several students had other commitments during the summer. Ideally, the program would have started in the fall so that the students would have been able to lead more workshops and thereby serve more of their community.

DreamYard is an organization that focuses primarily on arts education within schools or community organizations for the purpose of personal growth and education. While public performance is often a result of the work, one staff challenge was to teach the young men how to teach their peers--a vital aspect of the community service component.

The successes were numerous: The students learned skills and gained confidence in their abilities as written and oral communicators. Beaty observed, "Though the workshops were few, the impact was palpable. When members of the Young Men's Poetry Collective led workshops,

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their peers listened in a way that I, as an educator, rarely see, and the vast majority of the participants completed the exercises with willingness and ease. More importantly, each member of the Collective and the students in the workshops have been introduced to the concept of creative expression as a tool for dialogue, community building, and change.”

OUTCOMES:

A group of ten young men now have skills to write effectively about their communities and to share that writing with others.

Out of a total of 60 students who participated in the workshops, 57 students wrote poems—even students that the teachers claimed “never write.” Both classes had been introduced to poetry before, but had never had poetry taught to them by their peers on subjects they felt were “about things we think about.”

Several of the young men in the Collective began writing additional poems in their free time. “Before an afternoon session towards the end of our time together, I saw one of the young men—Jonathan—sharing his poetry journal with a young lady who was not in our group. He had a sense of pride in his ability as a writer and a desire to share.”

An assistant principal was so impressed with the writing produced by the Collective, she allowed two of the students to share their poems over the loud speaker during morning announcements and made a bulletin board of several of their poems in the main hallway.

A poetry chap book was placed in the library of each school and in the classrooms of student participants.

PROJECT PROFILE

THE POINT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION'S "ACTIVISTS COMING TO INFORM OUR NEIGHBORHOOD" (A.C.T.I.O.N.)

GOALS:

1. To assess the needs of young people and adults within the Hunts Point/Longwood (HP/L) communities
2. To engage the overall community in social change
3. To help the community empower itself by creating solutions to its problems

DESCRIPTION:

Youth participants helped the community identify problems and create solutions by enacting a variety of initiatives, such as a Community Clean-up Campaign and a Prostitution Outreach Program, most of which utilized media such as a website and a monthly public-access TV show.

ACTIVITIES:

The Point is a community development corporation that creates regular artistic and technology-media-based opportunities for community residents to address local concerns. The Point's youth program, A.C.T.I.O.N., uses film, newspapers, poetry, theatre, and the Internet to communicate and express youths' concerns.

The sixteen youth in A.C.T.I.O.N. started brainstorming ideas for a TV show and website in the summer of 2002. Staff posed these questions to the youth: What do you want to say through the TV show and website? How would you say it? What would each look like? How would they compare to and differ from each other? How would they stand out from other shows and sites? How could you use the TV show to promote the website and vice versa? How could you survey people to find out how many are watching the show or visiting the website?

"A.C.T.I.O.N. believes in using The Media – instead of being used by The Media – to achieve its goals of community activism. The arts allow for creative expression of the group's thoughts, ideas, opinions, and feelings. "

--Janis Astor del Valle, Program Director, The Point Community Development Corporation

In October 2002, the group was approached by a representative from a local cable access channel who saw the short documentary the group had produced titled Girls Talkin' Trash. She offered training at the cable station which would eventually allow them to produce their own show, Take Action!, on its Youth Channel.

Because of scheduling and resource challenges, actual production of the show was postponed to the following school year. However, in lieu of and in preparation for this media activity, the youth participated in a variety of activities, meeting three hours a day, two to three days per week. Most of this time was spent developing interpersonal and communication skills,

conducting research, and writing essays, articles, and poetry about social and environmental problems for The Point Community Development Corporation's newspaper, Hunts Point Alive!.

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The group used video to help hone their public speaking skills. Staff videotaped youth practicing speeches, then played it back and the whole group contributed constructive criticism. Staff also used some theatrical games/role-plays to make the learning fun. “Practice was key. Eventually, the students became more confident with their public speaking and written skills. Their overall confidence increased, too; they began to see themselves as community organizers who had an important voice that needed, deserved to be heard,” says Astor del Valle.

Next, youth created a website. “It was their idea to launch a website. They enjoyed writing for the newspaper, but they envisioned connecting with other young people on a variety of topics chosen by them.” The website serves as a way for the group to act as peer educators, reaching out to other young people across the globe about teen issues such as puberty, depression, peer pressure, relationships, homophobia, HIV/AIDS, STD’s, drugs, and pregnancy. Although many of the issues raised on the website are the same as those articulated in Hunts Point Alive!, the website offers a greater and more frequent opportunity to delve into these issues, explore new topics, and communicate with a wider audience.

The use of video and role-plays helped prepare the group for their acting roles in the short narrative film, *A South Bronx Tale*, which was shot in January. Written and directed by the Program Director, the film focuses on 15-year-old Ariana, who lives in one of the most homophobic ‘hoods in the South Bronx, where coming out is not an option. When her life and reputation are threatened, Ariana must choose between honoring herself or her familia. The film made its New York debut at the Columbia University Film Festival in Manhattan in the spring.

During the summer, A.C.T.I.O.N. discovered ways to utilize its films, *A South Bronx Tale* and *Girls Talkin’ Trash*, by leading workshops on “Using Media as a Tool for Social Change.” The group plans to continue exploring venues to conduct these workshops.

Youth also created surveys to achieve community activism. Surveys were created and distributed as part of ongoing environmental work (to monitor the community’s noxious fumes) and as part of a nutrition program (to survey local supermarkets and delis to measure the amount of healthy produce and foods available in the community). For both projects, A.C.T.I.O.N. will publish findings in the *Hunts Point Alive!*, post information on the website, and produce stories on their TV show.

Finally, over the summer the youth launched a Prostitution Outreach Program. Designed by A.C.T.I.O.N. member, Eric Wilson, this project entails creating and distributing pamphlets and resource guides aimed at educating local prostitutes about alternative life-choices and providing them with information on counseling and health services, job training, education opportunities, and STDs.

CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:

As is often the case, family, relationship, and school problems affected the young people in many ways and had an impact on their ability to complete certain tasks. For example, because of failing grades, certain youth had to take “leaves of absence” in order to concentrate on their schoolwork. At times, problems at home affected the young people’s ability to concentrate on their job. Anger management was also a problem: Some of the young people had trouble getting along with each other as they worked on certain projects, such as the website. As a result, other members had to take over their assignments, which slowed down the group’s overall productivity. The Point has addressed this issue by working out an agreement with an agency which will provide counseling from licensed social workers as needed.

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Through the course of the project, the youth “have become more independent over time....In the first year, we were all still struggling to find our way, getting used to the concept of what it really means to be community organizers and how to utilize the media and arts to convey our ideas of social change,” says Astor del Valle.

Funding and availability of resources has been a consistent challenge for the A.C.T.I.O.N. program as well. The group went for a considerable period without a meeting space and computers. There have also been some technical glitches with the website (e.g., missing graphics and characters, inability to track number of visitors to the site) that youth tried to address with the organization’s computer consultant. The logistical hurdles have proven to be learning opportunities, however. “I think the [youth] did an amazing job in terms of being flexible and learning to deal with said limitations. For example, having only one computer and printer available to them, they learned patience in taking turns and can perform duties that don’t require computer use. While one person’s typing, others are hand-writing, making copies, or conducting research.”

OUTCOMES:

Youth’s work has reached a wide audience. The Point Community Development Corporation’s newspaper Hunts Point Alive! is distributed citywide (approx. 5,000 readers); the web site reached an estimate of 2,000 people in the first year; and the TV show will reach an estimate of 5,000. For the website, these numbers are based on e-mails received (e.g., e-mails thanking them for the information provided, as well as queries from those interested in joining their community service efforts). In the future, the website will track “hits” for a more accurate count of viewers.

Youth demonstrated their public-speaking skills at numerous events and in interviews given to the media, including local television and newspapers.

As a result of the group’s ongoing field research, over 1,000 surveys were distributed to local residents, businesses, and organizations. Regarding the Prostitution Program, youth hope to reach at least one prostitute by convincing her or him to seek help.

Youth are recognized by their peers in school as well as by local residents and politicians. According to Astor del Valle: “The other day, we were walking along Garrison Ave. and there was this group of really tough-looking guys staring us down...I was a little scared....All of a sudden, the roughest-looking one burst out, all excited, ‘Yo, man, we seen yous on T.V.!’...Politicians, environmental activists, and the community in general are starting to talk about our program in a really good way. They are so impressed by the teens’ passion and commitment and the way they are able to articulate their concerns and ideas in a mature and cohesive fashion.”

Numerous youth have inquired about how to join A.C.T.I.O.N.

Narrative contributions for the above profiles were made by the following youth practitioners: Janis Astor del Valle & Ana Maria Correa (The Point), Daniel Beaty & Rod Bowen (DreamYard)